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## MANUSCRIPT OR NOTES? AUTHOR, AUDIENCE, AND SPIRIT IN WRITING FOR PREACHING

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### **Abstract**

This article reports on a study of the writing practices of Lutheran ministers as they prepare for preaching. Drawing upon qualitative interviews that focused on the writing practices of pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the article examines rationales for either writing out a word-for-word manuscript or writing notes to speak from, and analyzing these in terms of developing an understanding of audience and of the role of the Holy Spirit in the preaching event. The results show that for these participants, writing for preaching, whether composing manuscript or notes, means composing not only a sermon but also a version of one's agency and authority in relationship to the congregation and to God.

### **Writing as an Expression of Being and Agency**

A Lutheran minister sits in her office in a church basement on a Monday morning, studying a Biblical text and making notes. Driving to visit a parishioner in the hospital later that day, she listens to a weekly podcast from her former seminary addressing the week's text from several Lutheran theological perspectives. Later, she opens a laptop and begins to draft a sermon, composing sentences that will be revised and edited over a period of several days. Walking her dog after a late-night church council meeting, she finds herself mouthing aloud the words of the sermon in her head, rehearsing and revising as images of the faces of council members—some attentive, others disengaged or even scowling—flit across her mind. On Saturday, her day off, she prints out the sermon and highlights certain words and phrases with a marker, marking passages she means to emphasize from the pulpit.

Through all of these acts of composition, using different tools and strategies for writing, pastors (like all writers) do more than produce written products. Conceived as a “way of being,”<sup>1</sup> writing instantiates beliefs and identities, the varied streams of which must be called upon and composed from. Thus, in order to compose any other text, one also composes a text of a self, of a way of being the author. In this article, I will develop this idea using the example pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and specifically their ways of writing and being as they compose sermons. As we will see, composing a sermon text, in the form of either a word-for-word manuscript or notes to speak from, means composing not only a sermon but also a version of one’s agency and authority in relationship to the congregation and to God.

Close attention to the decisions pastors make as they write for preaching is important for an understanding of the pastor as leader. Drawing on scholarship of cultural production in congregations<sup>2</sup>, Jackson Carroll has characterized ministers as producers, even curators of congregational culture:

As producers of congregational culture, clergy give shape to a congregation’s particular way of being a congregation—that is, to the beliefs and practices characteristic of a particular community’s life and ministry.... Through the core work of the pastoral office—preaching, leading worship, teaching, providing pastoral care, and giving leadership in congregational life—a pastor helps to “produce” or at least decisively shape a congregation’s culture. As clergy preach, lead worship, teach, and counsel, they draw on beliefs, symbols, stories and practices from the Christian tradition to construct narratives and interpretive frameworks that help

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Yagelski, *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability* (New York: Hampton Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005).

members locate themselves and find meaning and perspective for dealing with issues in their daily lives.<sup>3</sup>

When pastoral leadership is read in this way, then preaching can be read in part as not only communicating the Gospel or an interpretation of Scripture to listeners, but also as modeling for members of a congregation how one makes meaning of Scripture and how one communicates that meaning. The process of writing that lies “behind” preaching, then, also is part of that model.

### **A View of Writing in Ministry Contexts**

Pastors write. They write for their congregations: newsletter columns, e-mails, Web sites, reports. They might write for themselves in journals or diaries. Some write for God, in prayer. And most visibly, they write sermons—some on Tuesday, some on Friday, some even in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Most every day, in many ways, pastors write. However, pastors (like most people who write in connection to their daily work and lives) have not usually thought of themselves as writers, and many seminaries include no explicit attention to writing in pastoral preparation. As one pastor, sitting in his office in a church, told me: “Our preaching course in seminary was called ‘From Exegesis to Proclamation.’ The ‘to’ in that title was a big ‘to.’ All the writing was in that *to*.”

In this article, I will open up that “to,” reporting on a study of the writing practices of pastors as they prepare for preaching, using either notes or a word-for-word manuscript. This writerly decision links to theology of the Holy Spirit, complicating notions of agency, audience and, ultimately, the author. Although this study is helpful for understanding writing in preaching and thus has implications for theological education and pastoral formation, it also provokes wider questions about how writers are situated and the nature of writing processes when a writer’s agency takes

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson W. Carroll and Becky R. McMillan, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 25–26.

shape in context not only of earthly others but also of a Divine One.

Writing is frequently used in American communities of faith in connection to prayer, textual interpretation, reflection and discernment, evangelism, and exhortation or preaching. Writing practices—that is, actions and habits related to writing—are social practices, and those practices result in texts that are themselves “lived, talked, enacted, value- and belief-laden practices.”<sup>4</sup> As Lankshear and Knobel explain, “People read and write differently out of different social practices, and these different ways with words are part of different ways of being persons and different ways and facets of doing life.”<sup>5</sup> This means that to ask how one composes a text—what steps are taken and what decisions are made—is also to ask who and how one is, at least for a moment and in a particular situation. Lankshear and Knobel note:

As carriers of practices, through participation in practices, individuals “perform” their bodies and their minds, their desires and ends, their emotions and values, in particular ways. They thereby achieve identity and membership, roles and relationships, understandings and accountabilities. In doing so, their “performances” carry the social order.<sup>6</sup>

Taking this view, any specific writing practice links to and performs a larger set of ideas and community memberships. These ideas and memberships are claimed as identity. Indeed, under a “practice theory” of identity,<sup>7</sup> identities are literally written, composed in part via literacy practices into “figured worlds” that we write, or figure, as much as we live in and respond to those figured worlds. Hence to be a pastor writing in the church context is to

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<sup>4</sup> James Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, *New Literacies*, 3rd ed. (London: McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2011), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Lankshear and Knobel, *New Literacies*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> D. C. Holland et al., *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

engage in a practice of pastoral identity, of relationship with congregants, of membership in Christianity broadly, and of membership in a particular Christian community—and, as we will see, to enact particular theologies related to those identities, relationships, and memberships.

The myriad ways in which people accomplish such enactments in religious settings is of increased scholarly interest of late.<sup>8</sup> With respect to preaching in particular, Moss<sup>9</sup> analyzes the construction of preached/preaching texts in the context of African American churches, treating sermons as social, participatory literacy events. Using cases of three preachers ranging from a “manuscript minister,” a “non-manuscript minister,” and one in between, Moss shows how the construction of the paper text, the spoken text, and the text of the preaching event together constitute the act of worship and community identities.

### Writing Practices in Preaching

Indeed, in the working lives of most clergy, a central writing event of a given week is the production and delivery of the Sunday sermon. Sermons are a complex textual locus through which parishioners, clergy, denominational influences, and the world outside the church converge in layered acts of writing, reading, speaking, and listening.

Yet the writing associated with preaching is usually obscured behind the oral event. Throughout the broad history of homiletic scholarship, preaching has been

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<sup>8</sup> R. J. LeBlanc, “Performance and Apprehension of the Mass in an Urban Catholic School: Strategy, Liturgy, Capital,” *Written Communication* 32(3) (July 1, 2015): 254–85, doi:10.1177/0741088315587904; K. Tusting, “‘I Am a Peacemaker’: Writing as a Space for Recontextualizing Children’s Identity in a Catholic First Communion Preparation Course,” *Written Communication* 32(3) (July 1, 2015): 227–53, doi:10.1177/0741088315586379; G. E. Muhammad, “Iqra: African American Muslim Girls Reading and Writing for Social Change,” *Written Communication* 32(3) (June 18, 2015): 286–316, doi:10.1177/0741088315590136; Mary M Juzwik and C. McKenzie, “Writing, Religious Faith, and Rooted Cosmopolitan Dialogue: Portraits of Two American Evangelical Men in a Public School English Classroom,” *Written Communication* 32(2) (April 1, 2015): 121–49, doi:10.1177/0741088315576480.

<sup>9</sup> Beverly J Moss, *A Community Text Arises: A Literate Text and a Literacy Tradition* (New York: Hampton Press, 2003).

described with an oral focus, with treatises on homiletic practice centering either on what the content of the sermon shall be or on its delivery. For example, Martin Luther's key legacies for preaching (important for an understanding of the Lutheran pastors studied in this article) have been content-focused. Specifically, he presented (a) Christ as a lens through which all Scripture might be read, meaning that the Old Testament can be understood in light of that which would later unfold upon Jesus' arrival, and (b) the "law and gospel" structure for the sermon, in which the law leads the listener to awareness of his or her need for salvation, to which the Gospel is then applied.<sup>10</sup> In the present, too, common seminary preaching texts and practical trade books on preaching for pastors tend to describe preparing a sermon rather than writing one, or they offer advice on delivery from the pulpit. Empirical studies have also been conducted on how pastors use the Internet in sermon preparation, but how the resources they consult are drawn upon in composing the sermon remains unexplored.<sup>11</sup>

Although reading and speaking thus take the foreground in texts about preaching, preparing to preach clearly involves significant amounts of writing for most pastors. Many pastors write a word-for-word manuscript of what they will say in the pulpit, and most others at least write an outline. In addition to the sermon text, other forms of writing occur in the process of sermon preparation, such as taking notes on the biblical text, writing marginalia in the Bible or in

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, Henry Eyster Jacobs, and Adolph Spaeth, *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes* (Ada, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1982); Dennis Ngien, "Theology of Preaching in Martin Luther," *Themelios* 28(2) (2003): 28–48.

<sup>11</sup> David H. Michels, "Dipping Into a Shallow Pool or Beginning a Deeper Conversation: A Case Study of a Minister's Engagement With the Internet for Preaching," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 8(3–4) (November 30, 2009): 164–78, doi:10.1080/10477845.2009.489814; Joshua D. Lambert, "The Information-Seeking Habits of Baptist Ministers," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 9(1–2) (2010): 1–19, doi:10.1080/10477845.2010.508449; Daniel Roland, "The Information Behavior of Clergy Members Engaged in the Sermon Preparation Task: Wicks Revisited," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 11(1–2) (2012): 1–15, doi:10.1080/10477845.2012.673112.

secondary source texts, and sometimes freewriting informally, making notes, or journaling that are done after a Biblical text has been selected and read but before the words of the sermon message are composed.

### **Manuscript or Notes? One Writing Practice in Sermon Preparation**

The question of whether to use manuscript or notes is a common one among pastors and among those who have studied preaching as a literacy event. Moss<sup>12</sup> describes a continuum of practice, along which an extreme manuscript preacher would be one who writes out a sermon word-for-word and then reads this document in the pulpit, while an extreme non-manuscript preacher would be one who speaks completely extemporaneously with hands empty of notes or other aids. Most preachers fall somewhere in between, and many preachers change their manuscript/notes practices over the course of their careers. Most introductory preaching texts and practical guides to preaching weigh in on the question, with mixed recommendations suggesting that each preacher find an individual approach. Like most composing choices, no one choice is best. Typically, the decision to move from manuscript to notes is discussed in terms of the listener.

This attention to the listener also characterizes empirical studies of homiletic practice. Guthrie, reviewing quantitative studies of preaching, notes that they fall into seven categories of focus, two of which address the content of sermons and four of which address characteristics or experiences of listeners.<sup>13</sup> One set of studies addressed the practice of preachers, asking whether feedback on their preaching improved their performance; however, because the feedback came from listeners, this research also is listener-focused. Surely listeners do and must influence the practice of preaching; worship is not a solo performance on

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<sup>12</sup> Moss, *A Community Text Arises: A Literate Text and a Literacy Tradition*.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Clifton Guthrie, "Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 30 (March 2007): 65–117.

the part of the pastor but a corporate event in which many engage together.

However, as we will see, qualitative study of pastors' writing for preaching revealed that listeners are not the only factor impacting the decision to work from a manuscript or notes. As the data make clear, these pastor-writers grappled with earthly audience and the Holy Spirit in ways that can inform us about audience and agency more generally, with implications for qualitative writing research and for religious leadership.

## Study Methodology

The data reported on here come from a qualitative study of the writing activities of Lutheran pastors, where writing was considered as an "abiding concern" of pastors (and of the researcher), accounts of writing experiences in ministry were collected via interview, and analyses focused on generating themes that characterized such experiences across a group of participants.<sup>14</sup>

### *Participants*

Participants were pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The eleven pastors worked in ELCA parishes located in one conference (local group covering sixteen churches in a county-wide area) of one synod (regional group covering 116 churches in seven counties) in central Pennsylvania. These participants meet monthly as a conference, and a few of them also meet weekly for shared study of the week's texts to be preached. They share a bishop and a number of common projects and professional education experiences as well, and most (not all) attended one of the two ELCA-affiliated seminaries in Pennsylvania.

Note that throughout this paper, I use the term *Lutheran* to denote the ELCA participants in this study and their faith; this is a convenience that obscures the broad diversity of

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<sup>14</sup> Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1990); Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994).



Christian expression calling itself *Lutheran* in the United States and elsewhere. The ELCA is by far the largest such group, with nearly 3.8 million members as of December 2014,<sup>15</sup> but other Lutheran groups in the United States include the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod with 2.1 million,<sup>16</sup> the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod with 380,000,<sup>17</sup> and several other smaller groups. These groups differ primarily in understandings of the literalness with which Scripture is to be interpreted, a difference expressed most visibly in positions on the role of women (the ELCA ordains women; the others do not) and on the participation of individuals of diverse sexual and gender orientations (the ELCA ordains LGBT pastors and allows for same-sex marriage).

Although they come from a variety of backgrounds, these participants share common experiences of preparation for ministry. All have Master of Divinity degrees, usually (but not exclusively) from an ELCA-sponsored seminary. Candidates for ordination also complete field experiences, including part-time introductory placements, embedded Clinical Pastoral Education at a site like a hospital or a nursing home, and a yearlong internship at a church working with an experienced mentor pastor. Seminary coursework varies by institution, but coursework always includes at least one course that focuses explicitly on preaching, with assignments including writing and preaching sermons with feedback. Other writing experiences at seminary include writing exegesis of Biblical texts, personal essays, course papers, and other products typical for a graduate degree program.

The eleven pastors in the analysis reported here include four women and seven men. All are white, which is consistent with the demographic profile of the

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<sup>15</sup> ELCA, “ELCA Facts—Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” 2015. [www.elca.org/News-and-Events/ELCA-Facts](http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/ELCA-Facts). (accessed August 12, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> LCMS, “LCMS Congregations Report Statistics for 2014 | LCMS News & Information,” 2014. <https://blogs.lcms.org/2015/statistics-for-2014>. (accessed August 12, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> WELS, “WELS Statistical Report,” 2014.

congregations in the synod (in which just 0.67 percent of active participants in congregations are people of color).<sup>18</sup> They gave their informed consent to participate in the research in accordance with procedures reviewed by my institution's Institutional Review Board, which governs research involving human subjects. In this manuscript, I withhold their names in the interest of making them unidentifiable to readers and less identifiable to one another.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data were collected in ninety-minute interviews using an open-ended interview guide. Pastors also shared relevant documents at their own discretion, ranging from copies of sermons, to copies or photos of notes made in preparation, to worship bulletins and other church documents. Interviews were transcribed and, where appropriate, keyed to any relevant documents they referenced while speaking. As a researcher, I was positioned as a professor at the local university, as well as a lay member of an ELCA congregation and a resident of the county in which the participants serve.

For the analysis reported in this article, references to preaching were extracted and coded and then compared across informant category. A single writing practice, the use of manuscript and/or notes, was then coded on for references to rationale or significance of the practice. In later analyses, having identified theology of the Holy Spirit as potentially important, data in which "preaching" and "Holy Spirit" were collocated also were extracted and analyzed.<sup>19</sup> Quotations exemplifying material under each code were selected for inclusion in this article with attention to these factors: (1) selecting typical statements under each code rather than selecting the "best" quotes; (2) ensuring that quotes used across the manuscript reflect the full range of participants and not a select few eloquent people; and (3)

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<sup>18</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), "Synod Statistics, Allegheny 8C Charts," 2011. [www.elca.org/en/Resources/Research-and-Evaluation](http://www.elca.org/en/Resources/Research-and-Evaluation). (accessed August 12, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2013).

reporting only themes that were supported by quotes from the full range of participants, and especially from participants across both groups of those writing manuscripts and those writing notes. These measures made it possible to keep this article to a manageable length while providing assurance that data quoted here do in fact reflect the entire dataset analyzed.

## Analysis

As one manuscript pastor said about writing a sermon, “I don’t want to *say*. I don’t want to *write*. I don’t want to *speak*. Writing a sermon is writing it, but then you’ve got to *proclaim* it.” Since Jesus is alive, the sermon is also in a way alive, and lived. As another pastor put it:

I think there are probably some forms of writing where it’s okay to live *behind* our words, i.e. “I put these words on the page; I’m willing to stand behind them.” That’s okay for some forms of writing, but when you’re writing for oration, I think you need to be writing words that you can live *in*...I’ve learnt to write, for this part of my life at least, words that would be authentic in person-to-person conversations. Words I believe in. And so I think I’ve been told, when people listen to me, they hear an authentic witness. They hear my heart.

For this reason, throughout the interviews, pastors spoke of “authentically proclaiming” a Gospel which, like Jesus, is “alive,” “moving,” or “still going on.” In doing so, they composed either a sermon manuscript or sermon notes.

Pastors were divided as to whether they used manuscript (six of eleven) or notes (five of eleven). A strong theme across all participants was striking. Whichever choice respondents made, their reasons involved the same combination of factors: both audience and the Holy Spirit matter, whether in support of manuscript practice or in rejecting manuscript. Thus, while being an ELCA Lutheran in this conference of this synod doesn’t necessarily imply a particular set choice about how sermons shall be composed

and delivered, it does imply a particular means of deciding the question.

## Audience

Books on preaching aimed at pastor-practitioners tend to discuss audiences in terms of generational labels or other demographic categories that make them more difficult to preach to—to interest, to keep interested, or to influence—than a presumed audience of the past that was accustomed to listening to long speeches as well as more willing to believe what a pastor had to say. A common theme in recent years, for example, has addressed preaching in ways that postmodern people can understand.<sup>20</sup> Others describe the needs of listeners for narrative or imagery.<sup>21</sup> These texts describe listeners as audiences whose preferences and needs must be catered to. Because younger people are accustomed to encountering multimodal, image-based texts via electronic media, an example piece of advice goes, sermons should engage central images (and, in many cases, should actually involve projecting images for audiences to see). In this, audiences for preaching are treated solely as an “audience addressed,”<sup>22</sup> in much the same way beginning writing students are typically invited to “consider your audience.” While not bad advice, that exhortation fails to capture the nuance of how audience is conceived and functions in an act of composition (which I will discuss in more detail later in

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, *Preaching While the Church Is Under Construction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1999); David J. Lose, “Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—Is Changing” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching That Connects* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994); Thomas H. Troeger and H. Edward Everding, Jr., *So That All Might Know* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2008); Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Jennifer L. Lord, *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Lisa S. Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford, “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy on JSTOR,” *CCC* 35(2) (1984): 155–71.

this article). Yet pastors in the study described their congregations as listeners for preaching very differently.

### *Knowing Their Audience*

First, the pastors in this study were aware that listeners have background knowledge based on particular sets of experiences, and that perhaps these experiences might differ from those of the pastor. For example, one pastor commented, “I noticed here that there are really concrete thinkers. So sometimes the poetry or the metaphor that I’m trying to use, I need to work it in a way that’s concrete, or the abstractions kind of get lost.” In response to this sense of her listeners, she describes images or analogies in more explicit detail for this congregation than she might have in a previous one. Another preacher described the diverse educational backgrounds of church members:

A lot of them are high school graduates. They have worked hard their entire lives. I can’t say that’s all of them. I have a retired high school principal. I have some that have a high school education. Then a majority of them will have a bachelor’s education. Then I have some graduate students....I have to just worry about how I’m going to get this across so they can understand it?

Anticipating that these different backgrounds lead to differing vocabulary, she pays special attention to avoiding overly complex vocabulary in a sermon.

They reported mindful use of the local context when preparing to preach, asking “What context are they? I have to kind of think about it. What’s the context, where do they live, where do they work? Who do they deal with? How do they operate? Then just how it fits into their lives. I can’t do that all the time, but I try to.” Another pastor, having recently moved from a rural church to one in a college town, commented on differences this move made for audience in preaching:

Jesus is the master teacher. He taught in very agrarian imagery because that was the context he was in. When I was in [former church], a dairy valley, there weren’t

too many active farmers anymore but a lot of farm families. I used images of land and farming and the countryside and the geography around there quite frequently in my preaching. Here in [current church near a university], I think you are speaking to a different group of people, ones that perhaps are more education-centric. Again, not better or worse, just having a different focus—not so much on land and tradition; they are much more transitory here.

Many pastors used a target age as one strategy for attending to the range of ages, educations, vocabularies, and interests of listeners, aiming for “an eighth grader” or using “words a sixth grader could understand.” One credited Luther: “I think that it was Luther that said, ‘A seven year old can understand the Gospel, but it takes a lifetime to really wrestle with it.’ So I try not to be too geared to just adults.”

Overall, the pastors interviewed reflect sophisticated thinking about their particular congregations, their location, parishioners’ background knowledge, and other features when crafting sermons. Further, the pastors were indeed aware of the spoken medium of the sermon as one requiring a different kind of writing than a print document. For example, one noted that while he is writing and reading the sermon on a computer screen, his congregation will not be. For this reason, he always sends his sermon texts by e-mail to his mother, explaining that:

Mom never finished nursing school; she ran out of money to do that. So, she doesn’t have the training that I have been blessed to have. I need to know that she gets it. Because anything that she doesn’t is not an appropriate sermon. She is sort of my barometer for whether I’m preaching appropriately in a way that can be apprehended by the ear.

This awareness of preaching as heard and not read can also explicitly play into whether the pastors write a manuscript or notes. For example, one pastor who moved from primarily manuscript to primarily notes explained:

There was a retired pastor who heard me preach. He was very kind and gracious, and a good friend of mine. But he said, “When I hear you preach, it really sounds like you’re writing. I think maybe it’s time you start thinking about preaching as though you’re actually speaking.” Kind of, find your voice and not just be writing all the time. That writing is fine when you’re reading it, and you can go back and look at what you said. But speaking it’s a different art form. That affected me. Over time, I started to dip my toe in the water of virtually extemporaneous preaching.

So audience characteristics and the fact that it is a listening audience, not a reading one, do matter when it comes to how pastors elect to write with manuscript or notes.

#### *Being With Their Audience*

However, in general, these ideas about listener characteristics or about oral-to-aural delivery were not primary in how pastors described their congregations as audiences for preaching or how they wrote for these listeners in particular. Instead, pastors’ discussions of listeners in the interviews positioned pastors and parishioners more collaboratively, focusing comments on listeners’ engagement, on relationship between pastor and listener, and, as we will see in the next section, on the ways the Holy Spirit and listeners interact.

They described listeners in relational terms and chose illustrations for sermons that reflected that relationship: “I can pick out certain things that have happened to them....I can say, ‘remember X garden and we blessed it?’ or something like that. I can do that here. It’s like a family conversation in a way.” Evidenced in comments like these, sermons were composed less out of a sense of “audience” characteristics than as part of a broader context of interactions in which pastors and members together worked through what it meant to live as a Christian. For example, a pastor described church members at a breakfast Bible study during the week as “really honest people.” She explained

how their conversations extended across the week, through sermons and beyond:

They will say something about “we didn’t get what you said, what were you talking about?” So, [the sermon] is kind of like a continuation of Bible study. Or they will say, “I never thought about that.” Then they will come up with all their own little things they wonder about. So, sometimes it’s a continuation.

That group, in fact, often met with the pastor to read and talk about Bible texts before they were preached about, and the pastor reports getting ideas about preaching from those conversations. So preaching wasn’t an utterance to which an audience listened, to understand or not; here, it was one turn taken by the pastor in an extended conversation between Christians encountering Scripture together.

Pastors drew upon specific relationships with individual church members in preparing for preaching, and specifically when either writing illustrations into a manuscript or, for notes preachers, directing particular comments to individuals in the room when preaching. For example, one pastor gave examples from a previous congregation he had served:

I had a member who had a very difficult divorce. When Jesus’ teaching in Mark comes up about divorce [a text in which Jesus condemns divorce], [that member] will be in the back of my mind. I will be thinking about “how might they hear what I’m saying?” Or “how might they hear what I am writing.” ...It might guide where I go with what this text means, and how can I preach both sides of the gospel that continues to allow that person to sit in the pew, and be affirmed, and to hear the grace in the text? Because this person’s problem was they couldn’t; they felt guilty. It was very hard to hear the Gospel or the grace in the text; all they heard was the law...Or, a few months ago, there was a text on demons. I know I have some who struggle with some mental issues. So again, they were in the back of my mind as I wrote. But I didn’t write necessarily for that person.



It is not as simple as saying that the pastor-writer is aware of members' divorces or mental health issues and tailors sermons to those, the way that an advertiser might tailor messages to forty-somethings or young moms. It's that the relationships a pastor has with individuals in the congregation enter into interpretation of the Biblical text and into the composition of the sermon, influencing not only the manner of the sermon's delivery but even its purpose.

Another pastor explained how the best compliment he could receive on a sermon was that it reflected a relationship, resembling a conversation. "[A parishioner] appreciated that whenever I preach a sermon it feels like I'm engaging the congregation in conversation. That I'm not talking at them, but it feels to them like we are all a part of this together—and that ... was high praise." This pastor imagined that his parishioners would say as a compliment "that I know people well." Conversely, he explained that a particularly challenging sermon topic, the sin of racism in America, was possible to preach on because

They know me here....I partially think that's [having been here for] eight years, *and* that's me trying to be authentic to who I am. So the person that they see in the pulpit is the same person that they see in their home or in the hospital. That's important to me.

This relationship orientation to listeners is specifically expressed in the decision to write either a manuscript or notes. For instance, one noted preacher explained that he has been blessed with a good memory, allowing him to forgo a manuscript:

Well, you can look at people, for starters....It generates a certain intimacy that you might not otherwise have. And also, when you do that [look at people] you very quickly dial into where the attentive are today. So if I see [Researcher's name] sitting out there and I see something, I say "Oh. I can interact with that." Or I get this puzzled look on your face, and I could say "well, let me say more about that."

Another explained how in preparing a sermon she focused on the students in her ministry who would be listening: “I will note the things that are kind of jumping out of me, and then I come up with some questions that we’re going to talk about—that I’m going to offer to talk about with the students. I usually start with something like What do you notice?” All of these findings about preaching as relational connect, in turn, to Everist and Nesson’s idea that “Transformational leadership is relational leadership that is intent on connecting the lives of people to the living Word of God.”<sup>23</sup>

### *Preaching as Audience Engagement*

As one interviewee put it, “preaching is an interactive event, and the more you can approach it in that way, the better.” The questions the campus pastor shared with her students in a sermon are examples of this; her preaching is an act of engagement *with* the text and *with* the students in the room rather than a finished interpretation *of* that is simply communicated *to* students in a sermon.

This means that, to these pastors, preaching involves not only offering an interpretation of a Biblical text, and not only communicating in a way that is likely to be understood. More precisely, preaching is sharing engagement with the text and with God. It is not simply showing that one has engaged with the text; it is doing so with parishioners. As one pastor explained:

I think [listeners] expect they will hear from me that I have engaged with the text. That I might even struggle with the text a little bit...the scripture is dynamic text...it is like no other genre because it is filled with the Spirit.... So to me that says you don’t learn scripture but rather you learn how to *engage* scripture.

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<sup>23</sup> Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nesson, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 84.

This vision of preaching, as engaging Scripture in a way that is shared, involves not only sharing with the human beings in the room but also, as the last pastor points out, the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Holy Spirit was discussed to bring out the reasoning for decisions in preaching, and specifically the decision to use a manuscript or preach from notes, at least briefly by all interviewees in the study.

### The Holy Spirit

Pastors in the study characterize the Holy Spirit as an active participant in the preaching event, engaging with pastor, text, and congregation along the entire time line of preparing a sermon, not only in its oral delivery and uptake by listeners but also in the writing practices that precede that delivery.

One pastor who preaches from notes described beginning by starting with the lectionary (a prescribed calendar of Biblical texts for each Sunday):

*I don't want to pick the lessons. Because then I will be doing the preaching. So I will go to the lectionary, and I say, "Lord, what do you want me to tell them?" If he doesn't answer, then I go through the lectionary and I say, "Lord what do I tell them?" If he doesn't answer, I go through the lectionary and I say, "Lord....?" That's my sermon preparation.*

The Spirit, he goes on, remains involved all the way through Sunday morning:

*He has made them hear whatever it is that they should have heard, despite what I may have said. I preached a sermon one day and three people thanked me for three different sermons, none of which I preached. That is when I learned that preaching is, not half, but three quarters of it is what the Spirit is, what the person hears.*

This participation by the Spirit at all stages of the sermon-writing process was cited by all pastors interviewed, even while they varied greatly in their experience of the directness of the Spirit's intervention. That is, the sentiment was shared by all, even though most do not report hearing

God's voice as a spoken voice, with others sensing the Spirit's direction, having ideas they attributed to the Spirit, or taking measures such as prayer to discern between the Spirit's calling and their own thinking. For example, another pastor prays directly that the Holy Spirit intervene to supersede what was written: "People pay me to talk to them, and it would be easy to get a big head, to say, 'You're coming to hear me.' No, you're coming to hear God, I just happen to have some thoughts on it this week."

In the end, most pastors' decision about using a manuscript or notes comes down to this. While knowing their listeners and catering to them as an audience matters and influences the decision to use manuscript or notes, and relationships with listeners matter and influence the decision to use manuscript or notes, ultimately it is in engagement with God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, that pastors make the decision. Thus, one explains that she writes a manuscript because "I can talk for hours, but I might not say anything...or say something that would ruin all of your foundation of faith... and you will miss the Gospel part, where I'm talking about how much God loves you." While another pastor can explain the opposite decision in similar terms, explaining that she does not write a manuscript because, with a manuscript, she became too invested in precise wordsmithing, the sermon becoming too much an item she was crafting and taking personal pride in, rather than something the Holy Spirit was doing. Or another can describe the task for preaching, for which he writes notes, as "Get out of the way and let Jesus get to the people." Or another can explain that he uses a manuscript because "I've always got to watch that *I* don't come out." It should be the Spirit, not the pastor. Where other writers might think about reaching an audience, these pastor-writers think also about not reaching an audience so that God's spirit can instead.

## Discussion and Implications

### *Writing as a Way of Being (With God)*

Writing has long been understood as a means to agency. Writing has many times been purported to have transformative power on the writer, a power that is characterized as an enhancement of writer agency.<sup>24</sup> In this view, writing is a way of becoming; the act of writing fosters agency in writers.

In Yagelski's *Writing as a Way of Being*, this sense of writing as becoming is refined into a way of being; that is, of experiencing oneself and one's existence. Yagelski's project is to offer a non-dualistic view of writing, in which self and world cannot be completely separated and in which there must be experience outside of or apart from language. He writes:

If we replace the fundamental separation of self and world...with a view of the basic interconnectedness of all beings, we can revise the problem of language and being. Instead of language being all we have and therefore the source of whatever truth we can find, as contemporary theory holds, language becomes a vehicle for understanding our experience of the phenomenal world as a foundation for truth.<sup>25</sup>

The result is a view of writing that is much better suited to describe writing in preaching than other views in which writer/reader and words/world are more separated.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert P. Yagelski, "Writing as Praxis;" Tracy L. Smiles and Kathy G. Short, "Transforming Teacher Voice Through Writing for Publication," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 33(3) (2006): 133–47; Freema Elbaz-Luwisch, "Writing and Professional Learning: The Uses of Autobiography in Graduate Studies in Education," *Teachers and Teaching* 16(3) (2010): 307–27, doi:10.1080/13540601003634404; Anne Elrod Whitney, Leah A. Zuidema, and James E. Fredricksen, "Understanding Teachers' Writing: Authority in Talk and Texts," *Teachers and Teaching* 20(1) (2014): 59–73, doi:10.1080/13540602.2013.848515; Anne Elrod Whitney, "Teacher Transformation in the National Writing Project," *Research in the Teaching of English* 43(2) (2008): 144–87.

<sup>25</sup> Yagelski, 82.

Take for example the preacher writing about God, as in preparing a sermon. If the writer is separated from what is written about, then the preacher writing about God is problematic: separation from God is the very definition of sin for these informants, and how can preaching necessitate sin? When writing is conceived dualistically, the dualities are writer/subject and writer/reader. But these informants report experiencing a third party, the Holy Spirit, engaging among and between writer and subject (the Holy Spirit being, in fact, a person of God and thus both subject and agent). And they report experiencing the Holy Spirit engaging among writer and audience as well, energizing words written and preached (in fact, to complicate further, *being* those words, if the Word is God) and energizing listeners to hear, understand, and believe.

The pastors interviewed here reported activity of the Holy Spirit in invention of, composition of, delivery of, and listening to sermons; further, God (whom the Holy Spirit is a person of) is both the subject of the sermon's words and, in a sense, the words themselves. Thus, where writing has typically been understood to enhance the writer's agency in relationship to subjects written about, here writing involves expressing ideas that are not one's own but are God's, or are even an expression of God. Where writing has typically been understood to enhance the writer's agency in relationship to audiences written for, here writing involves "getting out of the way" of the line between writer/preacher and reader/listener so that the Holy Spirit can do what it wants to do. Here, authorial agency is humility in God's presence.

To summarize, whether Lutheran pastors in this study used manuscript or notes, they all offered as a basis for their choice not only reasoning about their listeners and the text but also a particular understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching. Whereas the literature pointed toward rhetorical analysis, grounded in the relationships among preacher, listener, and content, pastors in their writing practice drew from theology—and the sense of relationships among preacher, listener, content, and Spirit. Their writing

was a practice of being in relationship to God in pursuit of God's truth.

Ultimately, this research has practical and conceptual significance, inside and outside of schools. First, there is potential for immediate benefits to members of religious communities, in the form of interventions to assist them as writers, to more intentionally utilize writing as a tool for spiritual work, and to mitigate the known stresses of the ministerial profession.<sup>26</sup> More broadly, documenting the complex systems of writing practices and processes that religious individuals and communities engage contributes to a fuller picture of literate practice and religious practice. Work of this type is needed to better understand the relationships between writing and ways of being in the world and being with God.

Much of my past research in the field of writing studies and education has developed the idea that through acts of writing, writers locate, claim, or even compose agency and authority for themselves. This includes authority with respect to content (“I know something about this and have the right to write about it”) and authority with respect to audience (“I have something to offer members of this audience and am entitled to address them through my writing”). As I have shown in these pages, the pastor-writers described here complicate that framework of agency and authority in that they redraw boundaries among author, audience, and text. In all of those relationships, the Spirit also participates, and thus in composing decisions, it is to the Holy Spirit that pastor-writers try to defer. In so doing, they enact an “interpretive leadership,” a view of pastoral leadership that says that “the purpose of Christian leadership is to make spiritual meaning.”<sup>27</sup> Specifically, this research shows how pastors who are writing for preaching include and engage the Holy Spirit in their interpretive leadership,

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<sup>26</sup> Jin Han and Cameron Lee, “Ministry Demand and Stress Among Korean American Pastors: A Brief Report,” *Pastoral Psychology* 52(6) (2004): 473–79, doi:10.1023/B:PASP.0000031525.27365.0c.

<sup>27</sup> D. Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

perhaps ultimately shaping with their congregations interpretive cultures in which they might do the same. It adds to understandings of preaching as creating an integrating narrative,<sup>28</sup> bringing together strands of faith, teaching, and experience in a particular community. Further, it shows how pastors can and do live in spiritual and reflective relationship with God in ways that can be seen as authentic by congregations and ultimately co-engaged in by pastors and congregations; in this way, it brings conventional ways of understanding writing into dialogue with notions of pastoral leadership as involving integrity.<sup>29</sup> Understanding writing practices of preaching up-close is thus one way to understand how integrity in pastoral leadership might develop.

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<sup>28</sup> Truls Åkerlund, "Preaching as Christian Leadership: The Story, the Sermon, and the Prophetic Imagination," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 13(1) (2014): 79–97.

<sup>29</sup> Sharon Henderson Callahan, "Leadership in Ecclesial Contexts: Integration of Art and Competence," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 2(2) (2003): 47–90.